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ABSTRACT

Several suggestions for interesting students in poetry and word play in the language arts classroom are presented in this paper. Activities recommended to establish a climate in which language play is a natural activity and to help students make connections between their own word play and that engaged in by poets include: expanding concrete images; producing catalog lists of things students strongly like or dislike; working on exercises with figurative language and word arrangement; and constructing concrete and found poetry. An additional suggestion for evaluating what students have learned is offered--having them examine and react to computerized poetry. (AEA)

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Language Play and the Teaching of Poetry

Charles R. Duke

English teachers have probably read more poetry than most other people and yet continue to find it one of the most difficult forms of literature to present to students. Student attitudes have much to do with this difficulty. Almost inevitably when a teacher announces that a class will be reading poetry, universal groans and grimaces occur all over the room.

We may be able to trace this attitude to previous experiences with a widely used approach called "what does it all mean?" The assumption upon which this approach is based is that students are automatically interested in poetry sufficiently to want to "dig" into poems to criticize and analyze line by line what they find. But putting analysis before appreciation and response with students usually invites a negative attitude. Common sense tells us that not all automobile drivers need to become mechanics before they learn to drive; why, then, should we insist that all students become poetry analysts before they have an opportunity to enjoy poetry?

What has been forgotten in trying to interest students in poetry is their need to discover that the poet at heart is a profound player with language. Most students never have the opportunity to see that even the most cerebral or lyrical of poetry has its playful elements and deliberate contrivance to make us wonder at its form. We have neglected to introduce students to this world of word play and make them fully aware that because it aims at language creativity, word play encompasses the highest skills of poetry, exploiting the full resources of the language--sense, musicality, structure, movement--to spark the mind and the spirit.

The rich language background which most children bring to school often disappears once children have been exposed to "school ways" with language. The spontaneous conversation of the young is marked by poetic images, magical colors and unique word usage; but somehow, by the time students reach the middle grades, their poetic

"Insides" have been tampered with, often to the point of producing dull, rhythmic conformity. Because words have sounds, shapes, rhythms, and ambiguous meanings, they can be juxtaposed in ways that not only tease thought but also create something which can be looked at, toyed with, and responded to on its own terms. Word play is meant to be fun, but it is also a significant part of any language arts curriculum because at its best, word play is also a creative response to experience; when words are the playthings, language power cannot help but increase.

Teachers who subscribe to such a view of language should take the time to build a climate in which language play is a natural activity. Time spent in creating such a climate reaps later on when students begin to make connections between their own word play and that engaged in by poets. The following activities should be useful in establishing such a climate and connection. What emerges from some of these activities will not necessarily be poetry; instead, what we look for in these activities is the freedom to experiment, to see words as building blocks, and to stretch students' imaginative uses of language. Once these things have been accomplished, we can expect to make the poetry connection with far less difficulty and much more positive reactions.

The Image

One of the primary building blocks of poetry and prose is the image. So often we ask students to be more specific in their writing, to let us see what is happening. The concrete image, however, often proves elusive. To help students with their production of images, we can begin with a simple concrete noun and verb--ie., "The girl runs." Then, with students, begin asking questions and seeking answers, all with the intent of expanding the basic image. As the figure begins to emerge as a character, create a context for the character and a problem that must be solved. The familiar Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How will serve well in this exercise. Consider the following sequence:

The girl runs.
(what girl? Who?)

The wan-cheeked, slender girl runs.
(where does she run?)

toward home
(how does she run?)

She staggers and limps
(Why does she stagger and limp?)

She's crying, gasping for breath,
and she has only one shoe

Here we can stop and put together what we have developed so far:

The wan-cheeked, slender girl,
gasping for breath, her eyes
glistening with tears,
staggers and limps home,
her small bare feet cut and bleeding.

(where has she been?)
school

(does she have books with her?)
Yes

(Why is she all alone.)

She cannot speak clearly and other children at school
ganged up on her and made fun of her. Frightened, she
ran away from the school yard, losing her shoes as she
crossed a stream.

Finally, we might have the following:

The wan-cheeked, slender girl,
her eyes glistening with tears,
staggers and limps toward home.
She walks painfully now because her
little feet are cut and bleeding.
Her two thin arms hug her school books
against her heaving chest; sobbing
and gasping for breath, she does not
see the figure on the other side of
the fence; the sound of a dog barking
causes her to lift her head; seeing
the frisky dog prancing next to the
familiar figure of her mother, the
girl breaks into a tear-stained smile
and begins to run toward the out-stretched
arms of her mother.

Such expansion of images can be done as group activities or by individual students; placing the results on the blackboard or on transparencies which can be projected for the entire class will help to demonstrate that a basic image can be expanded in many different ways. Students, if they wish, may look at several of the expanded images and then compile one major image by extracting details they like from other versions; the more combining, comparing, and building which go on, the more likely students are to get the feel for working with language to expand meaning.

Still another possibility for dealing with concrete words and images is to have students produce catalog lists. These lists may focus on objects, people, or events which students strongly dislike or like. Students can look at excerpts from Rupert Brook's "The Great Lover"¹ or John Peale Bishop's "The Great Hater"² as possible models. Emphasis should fall first on building the list as specifically as possible; once the list is completed, students can return to work with what they consider the most effective arrangement and order. Here is one girl's catalog about things she loves:

. . . Things that I love:

The rustle of taffeta,
Tchaikovsky's Concerto in E flat number one;
Deep snow brightening in the sun;
A foal gently lipping new spring grass;
A fellow who'll take me to Sunday mass;
Football games in November air;
The touch of a certain hand on my hair;
A "Lexington, Kentucky" postmark; New
Year's Eve romancing;
A cadet's icy buttons against bare shoulders
while we're dancing;
Men six feet and over, big dogs; chocolate
cake;
Swimming without a bathing suit in a hidden,
sky-blue lake;
The smell of a freshly lit pipe; rain splashing
in my face;
Stuffed dogs tied with satin bows; Christmas
and Christ;
Beauty and grace.
And of all the things that I most love,
To top all those I've named above
I should have put . . . John.

A variation on the catalog poem is to rhyme the items such as in the following:

I like T.V. . . .
 A.M. or P.M. I'll turn on the set
 For Barbara Walters or Carol Burnett
 Abernethy, Brinkly or Walter Cronkite,
 Push the button and make the screen bright
 With Mod Squad's capers or Archie's quotes,
 Weather predictions or precinct votes,
 Rams and Lakers and New York Knicks
 Hammy wrestlers for extra kicks,
 Happy commercials in fast or slow motion,
 Making a pitch for beer or lotion,
 Daytime or nighttime, so much to see;
 That's why I simply adore T.V.

A natural part of any image building, especially in poetry, is the use of figurative language. No attempt is made in the previous exercises to introduce the idea of metaphor or simile although either may appear on its own. Instead, students may explore the possibilities for metaphorical expression in the following activity.

Have students form groups of four. Each group will receive a natural object. They are to examine the object carefully, tapping it, scraping it, holding it--all the avenues of sight, sound and touch should be explored. Group members should share their observations with each other--what does the object smell like, look like, feel like, sound like. Encourage comparisons. Then each group member is to write two sentences about the object; place the following form on the blackboard for the groups to use:

The _____ is (a, an, the) _____/_____.

Students are to place the name of the object in the first blank and then their vision or insight in the second. They are to show that the object is equivalent to something else that is basically different; then in the third blank, they are to show how that "something else" is basically similar to the first object.

"The egg is a white stone/worn smooth by water."

When members of the group have each completed two sentences, they share the sentences within their groups and then decide upon the best order to place the sentences, one

sentence to a line. No lines may be dropped (there will be eight) but first words of a line may be dropped or changed to make the finished product read more smoothly. After groups have finished their poems, share them with the class. Placing the finished poems on transparencies will facilitate this process.

Encouraging students to look at words in new ways and explore methods for using words in unusual combinations is vital to increasing student sensitivity to the poetic possibilities of language. One exercise which encourages this view calls for inventing new word combinations. Students receive a list of words, usually short ones with very few abstractions; students are asked to take as many of the words as they can from the list, getting at least one from each column and then scrambling them in any order to produce images; they are encouraged to put words together in a way that no other human being ever has. Nouns can be changed into verbs, endings can be added and prepositions and articles may be used. Such a list might look like the following:³

red	snarl	wind
quick	coo	swan
still	sing	velvet
broken	weep	pickle
bright	tease	puppy
silent	race	lion
blue	smile	dishes
gold	stink	giraffe
clean	lie	wart
rotten	fly	leaf
high	sail	ring
green	bump	rubber
sticky	surprise	ocean
delicate	lick	ribbon
icy	chuck	steel
sleek	shoot	birth
silver	pound	hippopotamus
purple	dream	bullet
white	shout	peanut butter
brittle	sparkle	ghost
wee	chime	monkey
loony	chase	blood
rusty	scratch	wheel
cross	crackle	angel
humongous	mutter	junk
jagged	dance	wizard
cool	flapdoodle	clown
flaming	open	moose
stringy	grow	petunia
juicy	waddle	cake
deep	mooch	prissy

This exercise is particularly valuable for students who suspect they have no imagination. Variations on the game ^{also} can be used: word-poker, where a word is printed on each card of a deck and then each person receives a hand; from the words dealt, the individual makes as many different images as possible. Examples from any of these approaches might include "a pound of purple petunias," "the silver pickle spills its juicy ocean," and "delicately chiming earth."

Still further development of vocabulary can be stimulated by the use of rhyming synonyms and antonyms. Students build two lines of words; the first line consists of a series of synonyms or antonyms for the title word; the second line offers a personal comment on their use or meaning.

FAT

Fleshy, thick, obese, or plump;
In any case, the frump's a lump.

DULL

Shiny, incisive, keen, acute:
The cutting word can execute.

Arrangement

Once students have been introduced to the idea of language play, it will be difficult to stop them from asking for more. One way to begin to channel this motivation toward more formal poetry concerns is to begin to explore the possibilities of word arrangement. John Ciardi once claimed that "white space" helped to make a poem. Certainly many poets have followed this principle, some of them with startling interpretations of the relationship between words and arrangements on paper. An exercise which provides an excellent bridge between word invention games and the considerations of how words might appear to a reader to produce certain visual effects can be accomplished through an activity suggested by Dorothy Hennings.⁴ The exercise begins with brain-storming. Students respond to uncompleted statements by recording several random impressions for each statement. For example, one statement might be "To me loneliness means _____"; then students

are asked to use only one word to complete the sentence "Loneliness is _____."

Next, students react to "When I'm lonely, I'm _____." A student is then selected to collect half the class's responses while another student collects the other half. Additional concepts like love, blue, peace are then provided and the same format followed; each time two different students collect the answers; eventually eight students will have a number of answers from the class. At this point, discussion can occur about possible arrangements for words on a page; sometimes it is helpful to diagram a few of the possibilities on the blackboard:



From this point, students move into groups, with each student who collected answers serving as chairman of a group; all the responses are read aloud in the groups and each group is asked to select the three to six impressions that seem to fit together best because of the sounds of the words or because of some apparent relationship; words can be added, deleted or re-arranged; then an order for the impressions must be decided upon and the impressions arranged into some appropriate block design. Upon completion of the task, a member from each group can place his or her group's "impression blocks" on the blackboard for reaction from the whole class. Students are usually surprised at the effects they have been able to create.

After such an exercise, the teacher might want to talk about other forms of poetry such as concretism. In concrete poetry, the concentration is on letters, or a word or words by which a visual impression becomes as important as meaning. Concrete poems produce an object to be perceived rather than just words; hence, the term "picture poem" is sometimes used to describe the result such as in the following:⁵

THE CITY QUESTION

Wino?
 sidewalk.
 on
 face
 on
 Man
 Hurt?
 Sick?
 Knife
 In
 pocket?
 Danger?
 Medicine
 in
 pocket?
 May
 die
 without
 it?
 Forget
 him?
 Leave
 him
 to
 the
 cops?

Or try to help?

Found poetry is closely related to concrete poetry; the found poet takes words, phrase, and sentences that are discovered in public communications, such as advertisements, menus, signs, and reports, and arranges them into lines and stanzas that form fresh commentaries on or insights into life. The following example is taken from a restaurant menu:

Tahitian Fling

A zesty taste treat
that wafts you to Paradise
Fresh strawberry ice cream
and lime sherbet surfing
on half a pineapple
with white caps of whirped cream
and orange crunch.
Good enough to make
the natives restless.

Even traffic signs may form the basis for an effective commentary in a found poem.⁶

Yield
No parking
Unlawful to pass
Wait for green light
Yield
Stop
Narrow bridge
Merging traffic ahead
Yield

Yield

Yield

Providing students with magazines, various food containers or labels, newspapers and other public material will spark a number of interesting and often provocative found poems; in fact, once started creating found poems, students may never look at words in quite the same way.

While students are engaged in the exploration of word arrangements through concrete and found poetry, the teacher may also find it useful to introduce them to some poets whose works rely heavily on typographical arrangement. Probably the most accessible examples of the style are by e.e. cummings; a poem such as the following will provide a good starting point for discussion of such style and how

It may or may not contribute to meaning.

un
der fog
's
touch
slo
ings
fin
gering
s
wli
whichs
turn
in
to whos
est
people
be
come
un

Students trying to read the poem aloud will encounter difficulties initially; once the two sections of the poem are identified (the "slowliest" and the rest of the words), students will begin to see that Cummings has actually engaged them in the very process the poem describes.

Along with their positions on the page, poems, like prose passages, have aspects of internal consistency, coherence and order. Once students realize that poets tend to use language in ways that we may not commonly expect, they are ready to begin studying the structure of a poem. Scrambled poems are helpful in demonstrating the importance of structure. For example, ask students to take the following words and turn them into a poem, (the capitalization is as in the original):

a	face	river
Asked	for	the
calm	kiss	The
Cool	me	of

The actual poem by Langston Hughes called "Suicide's Note" looks like this:

The calm,
Cool face of the river
Asked me for a kiss.

Still another poem "puzzle" is the following one which also forces students to engage in some sentence combining activity:

1. The moon is a basketball.
2. The basketball is dribbled.
3. The dribbling is too much.
4. The basketball is worn.
5. The basketball is waxy.
6. The basketball is smooth.
7. The wearing is from floor boards.
8. The wearing is from sweaty palms.
9. The moon hangs.
10. The hanging is in the air.
11. The hanging is a hook shot.
12. The hook shot is slow.
13. The hook shot is speedless.
14. The hook shot is breathless.

a soft shadow arching across

the sky

of aching

anticipation. . .

Students more familiar with poetic structure can move on to more complicated exercises. One which works well is to simply take an unrhymed poem, label each line of the poem with a random number; then cut up the poem line by line; place the strips in an envelope; several different poems can be handled this way by groups and then the versions can be compared with the originals; the purpose is not necessarily to come up with the original order of the lines but to force students to examine lines carefully to detect possible relationships and movement; students engaging in this exercise will do a great deal of talking about poetry and structure before they finish the activity.

At this point, the teacher may well want to stop and take stock of what students have learned. To determine this the teacher may present the following for reaction by students.

O poet
 Blush like a rotten skin;
 Brighten like a dusty tower;
 Wall like a happy earthworm;
 Dream like an enormous flood;
 Tremble like a red locomotive;
 Flop like a damp gate! . . .
 The beaches are praying.
 Listen! How they stifle their enormous
 lips! . . .
 The river
 Winks
 And I am ravished.

After students have had an opportunity to examine the poem, ask for their reaction: What pictures or images do they like or dislike, why? What feeling do they receive from the piece. The purpose here is to get students to articulate some of the feelings about order of words, about arrangement, of words, and ultimately, about what they suspect ought to go into a poem and how it should work. The words they are examining were arranged by a computer--"The Meditation of IBM 70 94-7040 DSC--which had been programmed with simple grammar, assorted stanzaic patterns and a vocabulary of 950 words drawn from a random selection in classical and avant-garde poetry.⁸ Whether electronic circuitry is better than the human brain is immaterial at this point as long as the creation sparks student discussion--and it will.

If all seems to be going well, students can move on to some of the easier poetic formats such as cinquains, haiku, tanka and then to ballads, other formal verse patterns and free verse. Occasional reminders and even returns to some of the exercises mentioned early should be made to help students remember the importance of language play in poetry and keep alive an interest in how each poet they encounter is a language player and creator.

Notes

1. The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke. New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, Inc., 1917.
2. The Collected Poems of John Peale Bishop. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
3. From David Anderson. My Sister Looks Like a Pear. New York: Hart Publishing Company, Inc., 1974, pp. 122-123.
4. "Pre-Poetry Play: Building Impression Blocks," Elementary English. December 1972, pp. 1149-1151.
5. Robert Froman. Street Poems. New York: McCall.
6. Ronald Gross. Pop Poems. New York: Simon and Schuster.
7. James Hobbs from Barnett, Hobbs, Parker, and Johnson. Sentence Combining. Colorado Writing Power Company, 1978.
8. Time, February 22, 1971, p. 77.